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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000022

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: MARONITE PATRIARCH SFEIR ANNOYED AT LAHOUD, AOUN

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 1/2 meeting with the Ambassador, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, in an unusually grouchy mood, was sharply critical of President Emile Lahoud and MP Michel Aoun. In Sfeir's view, Lahoud should follow the Patriarch's advice to step down; Aoun should yank his followers from the downtown sit-in immediately and cease his unseemly practice of giving Christian credibility to Hizballah. Sfeir said that the political crisis should be solved by a new president, a new government (triggered constitutionally by the new election law), a new legislative election law (preferably based on the 1960 "qada" law), and then legislative elections -- in that order. He praised PM Siniora as a "true Lebanese," in contrast to previous Sunni premiers whose loyalties to the Lebanese state were considered suspect by the Christians. While dismayed by the current situation, he did not have new ideas for moving forward and argued that he has already done as much as he could to rein in Aoun and prod Lahoud to resign. Sfeir also described the Special Tribunal for Lebanon as essential. Always concerned about the international commitment to Lebanon, he was grateful for the assurances that the USG will not abandon Lebanon or trade its interests to Syria. End summary.

GRATEFUL FOR U.S. SUPPORT

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, noting that he had recently been in Washington for consultations, briefed Sfeir on the continued USG high-level interest in Lebanon and our commitment to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. Sfeir expressed appreciation for the Ambassador's assurances that USG policy toward Lebanon is not changing and that the U.S. will not make a deal with Syria at Lebanon's expense. Sfeir was grateful that the Secretary had called him before Christmas to express U.S. support.

SCORNFUL OF AOUN

¶3. (C) Asked by the Ambassador for his assessment of the current situation, Sfeir claimed that Lebanon is in "a very dangerous period." The downtown demonstrations are "shameful," Sfeir claimed; the only reason people remain in the tents is because they are being paid "fifty dollars a day

to stay there." What kind of democratic movement has to pay its people to maintain a sit-in, Sfeir asked scornfully. He said that he had advised General Aoun (who called on the Patriarch the previous day) to remove his protesters from downtown Beirut and lift the Christian cover to a Hizballah effort. How could Aoun allow his own credibility to be used by "those people." Aoun responded that he could not prevent his people from exercising their democratic rights. What can I do, Sfeir asked rhetorically; "he doesn't listen."

DEAF MAN IN BAABDA

14. (C) The other deaf person in Lebanon is President Emile Lahoud, Sfeir said. Lahoud, occupying the supreme Christian political office in the country, did not bother to come to Christmas mass at Bkirke. While Lahoud cited security concerns, Sfeir listed other prominent politicians presumed to be on Syrian-sponsored hit lists who did make it. "He didn't want to hear what I had to say about the presidency," Sfeir said. Sfeir repeated the story about how he had sent a bishop with a letter to Lahoud stating that Lahoud should resign, but Lahoud feigned a lack of comprehension of the message. Given that Sfeir has now acknowledged publicly (on an LBC talk show) that he asked Lahoud in writing to resign, Sfeir said that he concluded that nothing he could do would work to remove Lahoud. The Syrians must have threatened him, and he can't step down for fear of being killed.

TO SOLVE CURRENT CRISIS, START WITH THE PRESIDENCY

15. (C) Repeating much of what he said during his LBC interview, Sfeir argued that all three constitutional institutions -- the presidency, the cabinet, and the

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parliament -- must be "renewed." While everyone in Lebanon seems to agree, he said, the question is the order. In his view, there is no question. To start with the parliament, one needs a new legislative election law. That will take time, and no one believes that the current cabinet and president would agree on an electoral formula. To start with the cabinet, the majority will have to voluntarily give up the blocking minority to the others, and that is not reasonable. Thus, Lebanon should start with the presidency. Electing a new president will lead constitutionally to a new cabinet automatically. The new cabinet and the new president together can work on an election law to submit to parliament. Once a law is drafted and implemented, then one can talk about legislative elections.

16. (C) As for starting with the presidency, Sfeir said that it didn't matter whether Lahoud leaves now and his replacement named, or his replacement is named early and Lahoud is then permitted to complete his extended term (as when Elias Sarkis was elected six months before the expiration of the term of Suleiman Franjeh), Either option will change the dynamic. Sfeir said that he had no new ideas on how to promote presidential elections now. But, he said (again repeating his recent formulations), the president must be a "compromise," a "neutral" figure who is "equal distance from March 14 and March 8." Michel Aoun does not yet understand that he cannot be president, and Sfeir offered no other names. (When stating again his belief that the constitution's ban on military officers becoming president, however, Sfeir suggested that LAF Commander Michel Sleiman is not his candidate.)

NOSTALGIA FOR 1960 QADA LAW

17. (C) Regarding the legislative election law, Sfeir stated a preference for renewing a 1960 election law that relied on majoritarian voting in small "qada" districts. Fouad

Boutros' draft law and its mixed system is too complicated for anyone to understand, Sfeir said. The "qada" law worked in 1960, and it would work now: representatives would be close to their constituents. The Ambassador noted that Parliament Speaker Berri is unlikely to back a "qada" majoritarian law, for he will want to be able to accumulate votes proportionately through larger districts. Sfeir shrugged.

PRAISE FOR SINIORA
AS A "TRUE LEBANESE"

18. (C) The Ambassador asked Sfeir his opinion of PM Siniora's performance. Sfeir generously praised Siniora, saying that he "speaks as a true Lebanese." (This was shorthand for the common Christian concern that Lebanon's Sunnis have identified not with Lebanon -- an entity carved out of greater Syria to protect the Maronite Christians -- but with Syria or the broader Sunni Arab world.) In fact, he was the "only" Lebanese prime minister who has done so consistently. Sfeir did not understand Michel Aoun's attempts to discredit and weaken Siniora. "Who would be better for Lebanon right now?" Sfeir asked.

TRIBUNAL DESCRIBED
"AS ESSENTIAL" TO STOP KILLING

19. (C) Asked about the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Sfeir described it as "essential." "Otherwise, the assassinations will continue." And, yes, he shared that view with Aoun, who assured the Patriarch that he did not oppose the tribunal. But Sfeir questioned whether Syria would "allow" Aoun to vote for the tribunal, should it come before parliament. Surprised, the Ambassador asked Sfeir whether he thought Aoun had willingly become an accomplice of Syria. "I think he's trapped," Sfeir said; "just like Lahoud. He can't move from where he is."

FELTMAN